

POLITICS

How Racism Invented Race in America

The case for reparations: a narrative bibliography

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As I've said before, the idea of reparations precedes this month's cover of *The Atlantic*, and the work around it—among scholars, activists, and writers—has been ongoing, even if the interest of the broader world is fickle. Following up on the autopsy of an idea, I thought I'd give some larger sense of how something like this came to be. My hope is to give people who are interested some entrée into further reading, and also to credit the antecedents to my own thinking. Perhaps most importantly, I wish to return to one of the original features of blogging—the documentation of public thinking. I would suggest that more writers, more academics, and more journalists do this, and do so honestly. It has come to believe that arguing with the self is as important as arguing with the broader world.

Okay. On y va.

Recently, a young woman told me that this generation of Americans was "the most diverse in American history." The assumption was that across the span of that history, there was some immutable group of racial categories whose numbers we could compare. I am not sure this holds up. Biracial is a new category for America, but it is not clear to me that today there are relatively more children of black and white unions than there were in the past. We certainly are more apt to acknowledge them as such, and that is a good thing. Nevertheless, the assumption of that "something new" is happening "racially," that these terms are somehow constant is one of the great, and underestimated, barriers to understanding the case for reparations.

The myth of any such constant was exposed to me at Howard University. I was a history major—and yes, I am bragging about this, and not at all humbly. In all my history classes we were treated to the dizzying taxonomy of race—mulatto and Italian, creole and quadroon, Jew and mestizo. This terminology would change quickly, change back, and then change again. And borders would change with

No work more influenced my own thinking on this more than St. Clair Drake's two-volume work *Black Folk Here and There*. Drake is better known for his study of Chicago, *Black Metropolis*, a book that informed the profile I wrote of Michelle Obama and, to some extent, my work on reparations. But *Black Folk* was the first book that made the argument that sticks with me to this day—that there is nothing particularly "natural" about viewing people with darker skin and curlier hair as inferior. Drake surveys all perceptions of people with darker skin, curlier hair, or both across history. He finds very little consistency and concludes that racism, as we know it, is basically a product of the slave trade, which is to say the seizure of power.

Other books confirmed Drake's basic insight to me—Allison Blakely's *Blacks in the Dutch World*, Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People*. If you can get your hands on it I also would recommend *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, which is both expensive and priceless. It's fascinating to see how black people were viewed before we decided that African ancestry made you, by God or science, property. For a energetic rebuttal (which I find ultimately unconvincing) see Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*.

The import of this all came home for me many years later in Barbara and Karen Fields's *Racecraft*. The book is a collection of essay, and is sometimes hard to follow, but its basic insight is brilliant. Basically, Americans talk about "race" but not "racism," and in doing that they turn a series of "actions" into a "state." This is basically true of all our conversations of this sort, left and right. You can see this in all our terminology—racial justice, racial quotas, racial discrimination, etc. But this language is ahistorical, and it obscures the current conflict. Affirmative action, for instance, is not intended to remedy plunder (action) but to aid "women and people of color" (state) or produce "diversity" (another state). And the benefits of affirmative action are not people who have been plundered, but "the black race."

But American notions of race are the product of racism, not the other way around. We know this because we can see the formation of "race" in American law and policy, and also see how formations differ across time and space. So what is "black" in the United States is not "black" in Brazil. More significantly the relevance and import of "blackness" is not constant across American history. Edmund Morgan's

demonic Spanish. By the end of the book the great-grandchildren of the English are convinced that blacks are a singular blight upon the Earth. The change is not mysterious. Morgan traces the nexus of law, policy, and financial interest to show how current notions of "blackness" and "whiteness" were formed.

It is important to remember that American racism is a thing that was done, and a world where American racism is beaten back is not a world of "racial diversity" but a world without such terminology. Perhaps we can never actually get to that world. Perhaps we are just too far gone. But we should never forget that this world was "made." Whiteness and blackness are not a fact of providence, but of policy—of slave codes, black codes, Jim Crow, redlining, GI Bills, housing covenants, New Deals, and mass incarcerations.

I did not understand it at the time, but this way of thinking pushed me toward reparations. In the popular mind, reparations is seen as a "race-based" scheme, i.e., giving money to people solely because they are black or have direct African ancestry. But if you understand racism as the headwaters of the problem, as injury, as plunder you can reorient and focus not on the ancestry but on the injury.

For me it goes back to *Black Folks Here and There*. I came to St. Clair Drake feeling a deep need to prove that the Ancient Egyptians were "black." (The whole first volume is a consideration of "race" and Ancient Egypt.) I was dogged by Saul Bellow's challenge: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?" I left feeling like Ralph Wiley.—Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus. Wiley's point was that the entire exercise of attempting to prove the worth of humans through monuments and walls was morally flawed. This was radicalizing. It warned me away from beginning an argument with racist reasoning, by accepting its premises. The argument for racism is corrupt at its root, and must be confronted there. You can understand how such thinking might inevitably lead you toward reparations.

Over the next few days I'll write three more posts like this—covering enslavement, housing and domestic policy, and thinking around reparations. If I were starting out and trying to grapple the relationship between "race" and "racism," here is how I would proceed. It is not the only—and perhaps not even the best—path. It's simply the one I'd suggest.

light and "whites" in another.

2.) ***White Over Black*, by Winthrop Jordan**

I don't agree with this book, but it's important to confront the counterargument—that Anglo-American culture is racist at its very root and predisposed toward hatred of black people.

3.) ***The History of White People*, by Nell Irvin Painter**

A deeply amusing book that finds great minds—chiefly Ralph Waldo Emerson—arguing that race explains why "Celts" are Catholic and "Saxons" Protestant. It also reveals how poorly racist thinking ages. The book is an eminently readable guide through the evolution and conception of white people. Again, nothing inevitable here.

4.) ***Black Folks Here and There*, by St. Clair Drake**

The source for me. This book changed my life. I've listed it so low because at the time I read it, I had nothing else to do, really. I didn't do much homework. I skipped a lot of class. I just soaked stuff like this up.

5.) ***"On Being White ... and Other Lies," by James Baldwin***

No one is better on the idea of "race," and particularly whiteness, and its import than Baldwin: "No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations and a vast amount of coercion ..." In this essay, he brings together all the history and wastes no words dumbing down its likely import:

... in this debasement and definition of black people, they have debased and defined themselves. And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they dare not confront the ravage and lie of their history. Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers Because they think they are white, they believe, as even no child believes, in the dream of safety.

This, to me, is the deepest significance of reparations. People who think this is just a matter of giving black things vastly underestimate the challenge. Reparations may seem impractical. Living without history, I suspect, will—in the long term—

Editor's note: This is the first part in a four-part series on the works of history that informed the author's recent piece, "[The Case for Reparations](#)." Part two, on slavery, is [here](#).

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